



‘We are what we eat’.

In the last few weeks, we have been reflecting on Jesus as the bread of life. Beginning with the account of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, the Gospel writers have been leading us more deeply into the mystery of who Jesus is: he is the Messiah, the Christ, the one who leads us to his heavenly Kingdom; and he equips us for the journey by giving us the Bread of life, himself. He is the giver, and he is also the gift. He doesn't merely provide the food for the journey: he is the food.

The story of Elijah in the wilderness picks up on the link between journey and food. Worn out with his exertions against the prophets of Baal and fleeing from the wrath of Jezebel the wife of King Ahab, he finds himself in the desert, exhausted and despairing and wishing for death. And surely he meant it: the desert is not a place to be without food or drink. But it is here, where he would least have expected it, that the Lord provides him with food and drink, enabling him to carry on. He is not only renewed physically, but he is renewed spiritually and ready for the next step in his prophetic ministry.

This story reminds us yet again that the Lord does not desert his servants, that he will continue to provide the daily bread that sustains us on our way.

It was long believed among the Jews that, one day, the manna from heaven would be given again: this was to be the sign that the day of the Lord had come. But as is often the case, things seldom, if ever, happen exactly the same way twice. The new manna would not be like the old. Yes, there would be a day of the Lord. Yes, the Messiah would come and feed his people, but this time it would be something different, not what the people of Israel expected.

The Gospel reading draws this distinction between the old and the new. The manna in the desert that sustained the people of Israel, and the food that revived Elijah could not confer eternal life. The Bread that Jesus gives, his flesh for the life of the world, is the only thing that could do that. It is by eating the flesh of the son of man and drinking his blood that we are enabled to walk the path that leads to heaven. No wonder the Jews were appalled and revolted; no wonder some turned away from Jesus. It is a hard teaching. Nonetheless, our response can only be Peter's: ‘Lord, to whom shall we go; you have the words of eternal life.’

At every Mass, this teaching is lived out. The Holy Spirit makes this miracle possible: Jesus present to us, given for us, given to us in Holy Communion. But it is important, no, vital, for us to remember that this is not just *my* communion with Christ. It is not just *our* communion with Christ. It is also our communion with each other in Christ. The bread which Jesus gives is his flesh for the life of the world. And so St Paul reminds the Ephesians of this social

communal dimension when he warns them against grudge-bearing, name calling or voice raising. The bread of life is the bread of forgiveness, the bread of love, the bread of sacrifice and, as Christ has loved us, so we too are to love each other.

This is the second miracle of the Mass, as wonderful as the first. Not only does Jesus give himself to us. We give ourselves to him and to each other. We don't just break bread: the Bread of life breaks us. Breaks us from what we are to what we shall become; breaks us out of our old life into the new; breaks us out of the life of this world into the life of the world to come; breaks us out of our selfishness and self-containment and into the life of the Holy Trinity, where Father, Son and Holy Spirit give themselves wholly to each other.

In other words, the ultimate purpose of the Mass is not to consecrate bread and wine, but to consecrate us.

A wonderful story about the martyrdom of St Polycarp, who was said to be a disciple of John, illustrates this point. Sentenced to be burned to death, and tied to the stake, he began to pray the Eucharist prayer over himself; he prayed that he would become the body of Christ. As he reached the great Amen, the pyre was lit. The writer of the account of his martyrdom wrote that: the fire, assuming the form of a vault, like the sail of a vessel filled with the wind, defended the body of the martyr roundabout; and it was in the midst of the flame not like flesh burning, but like bread being baked, or like gold and silver glowing in the furnace. And we perceived such a sweet-smelling savour, as though from the breath of incense, or some other precious perfume.

We may not be called to lay down our lives, but we are called to be witnesses to Christ. As the story of Polycarp shows, the life of the Christian is intimately bound up with the Eucharist. We should be a simple and wholesome and as nourishing to others as bread. People should almost be able to break a piece off us and be nourished by us. Through the gift of the Bread of life, we too, can be a gift to others.